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S E C R E T PANAMA 000008

NOFORN
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/30/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PM](#)
SUBJECT: PANAMA: EMBERA INDIANS REPORT FARC TAKE OVER OF
VILLAGE

REF: A. A: PANAMA 00955
[1](#)B. B: PANAMA 00917

Classified By: Ambassador Barbara J. Stephenson for reasons 1.4 (b) and
(d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (S//NF) The FARC had taken over the village of Pavarando, leading to the flight of 200 Embera, who are still displaced from their homes, Edilberto Dogirama, the President of the Council of the Embera Comarca, told EMBOFFs on December 19. He said it took over two weeks for the GOP to send forces to the village. Dogirama asserted that senior GOP officials were most concerned that the Embera stop talking to the Embassy and the press. He asserted that a group of 200 heavily armed FARC from the 58th Front (Note: Subsequent information and analysis revealed that these FARC members belonged to the 57th Front. End Note) appeared around Pavarando on December 14 and were trapped by the mountains for up to 10 days before escaping to Jaque. He said Panamanian Frontier police finally entered the village after the FARC had left. The SENAFRONT officers reportedly left the village on December 28. End Summary.

FARC Arrive in Pavarando

[1](#)2. (S//NF) Edilberto Dogirama, President of the Council of the Embera Comarca (the administrative apparatus of the Embera semi-autonomous government), told EMBOFFs on December 19 that armed members of the FARC had taken over the Embera village of Pavarando in the Embera Comarca (autonomous region) of Sambu, on December 7. He said six self-identified members of the FARC, five men and one woman, had entered the village and told the inhabitants that they would not hurt them, though they could not promise the same for those who would come after them. They took control of the one phone in the village and began buying food and medical supplies for "a large number of men." According to Dogirama, the FARC members tried to pay for all the supplies they bought with \$100 bills. As the Embera could not change the money, they "gave" them the supplies for free. Dogirama said there had been reports of strange movements, supposedly by the FARC, around the town since December 1.

Embera Flee

13. (S//NF) According to Dogirama, the Embera leadership alerted the National Frontier Service (SENAFRONT) police, and were told that forces would be sent from Manene. SENAFRONT police had been sent to Manene after reports that "irregulars" had kidnapped several teachers in that town (see reftel A). Dogirama said Embera residents in Pavarando reported that SENAFRONT officers subsequently called Pavarando on December 9 and spoke with members of the FARC. SENAFRONT officers reportedly ordered the FARC to leave the town and were told that the FARC would be waiting for them. Following the firefight in Manene on December 11, reported in reftel, most of the Embera from Pavarando and Boca Guina (the next village north of Pavarando on the Sambu river) departed the area on December 12. Dogirama said approximately 200 Embera left the villages without taking any of their possessions, eluding the FARC by claiming they were going to swim on the river. They then fled in boats to Puerto Indio, the Comarcal capital further north on the Sambu river. Dogirama reported that UNHCR was helping to feed the internally displaced Embera, but had asked that they not go public with the fact (Note: Due to the holidays, Post was unable to contact UNHCR. We will report on such contact septel. End Note) The people of Pavarando and Boca Guina were staying with family members or in empty houses in Puerto Indio. The Embera Gran Cacique (Chief) Betanio Chiquidama, told POLOFF by phone on December 24 that he would not allow the displaced Embera to go home until the situation on the ground was totally safe.

GOP: Don't Tell the Gringos!

14. (S//NF) On December 12 Chiquidama called POLOFF and gave a rough report of these events. Other EMBOFFs met with him later in the day to get more details of the unfolding events. On the evening of December 12, 1st VP and FM Samuel Lewis told the Ambassador he was very concerned about recent events in the Darien, and requested urgent USG assistance, including Night Vision Goggles (NVG) (see reftel B). Dogirama said that when the Embera leadership met with Minister of Government and Justice Dilio Arcia on December 14 he was upset with them for having called the Embassy. Arcia asked the Embera to calm their people down and not to go to the media. They asked him to establish a permanent SENAFRONT police presence in Pavarando. President Martin Torrijos then met privately with Chiquidama, Dogirama asserted, and asked the cacique to stop calling attention to the matter. Chiquidama told Torrijos that he would oblige as long as SENAFRONT police established a permanent post in Pavarando, according to Dogirama. Finally, Vice Minister of Government and Justice Severino Mejia met the Embera leadership on December 16, and promised to send SENAFRONT officers to Pavarando. Dogirama said at the December 19 meeting that the Embera would meet with MOGJ officials on December 22, and that if they did not hear that SENAFRONT had established a presence in Pavarando they would go to the media on December 23. On December 23 Dogirama told POLOFF that the Embera had confirmed the presence of 30 SENAFRONT police officers in Pavarando, adding that the Embera would not go to the media. Dogirama said he had received an angry phone call from Major Felipe Cruz (date unclear), in charge of intelligence for SENAFRONT police, complaining that they had gone to the "gringos," and saying, "This is none of their business." Cruz told EMBOFFs on December 29, "Don't believe everything the Embera tell you."

58th Front Lost?

15. (S//NF) According to Dogirama, on December 14-15 approximately 200 heavily armed men with sophisticated communications equipment (satellite phones) appeared on the

outskirts of Pavarando following the confrontation in Manene on the December 11. They were camped out about 15 minutes to the south of the village. He explained how he had this information by saying that there were still nine Embera men in the town, and that they were able to occasionally report out. He said that as of December 19 there were 20 armed men in Pavarando itself. Dogirama asserted that the men were from the 58th Front of the FARC, and that they had been driven out of Colombia by a Colombian military offensive. (Note: Subsequent information and analysis revealed that these FARC members belonged to the 57th Front. End Note) As a result, they were not familiar with the area and could not find their way to the Jaque valley, where the 57th Front has a camp. He said they had been overheard discussing coordinates with the 57th Front in Jaque by sat phone, reporting they had wounded and urgently needed to cross the mountains to the South and get to the Jaque valley where they could get medical attention. According to Dogirama, they are trapped in the Sambu valley because they did not know how to get through the mountains that Dogirama asserted were extremely treacherous. He said the Embera had refused to help them make their way over the mountains. On December 18, according to Dogirama a seriously wounded man appeared in Pavarando apparently wounded during the fighting in Manene on December 11. He said there were three other moderately wounded men. Dogirama said the Embera believed the woman who first appeared in Pavarando had died in the fighting in Manene because she has not been seen again. Dogirama told POLOFF on December 24 that the armed men had passed through the mountains to Jaque, prior to the arrival of 30 SENA FRONT officers to Pavarando Cruz told EMBOFFs December 29 that the officers had pulled out of Pavarando on December 28, because it was too expensive and dangerous to leave them there.

Comment

¶6. (S//NF) Dogirama's story helps explain many confusing aspects of this incident. While Post has no insight into what this group was doing in Panama, it now seems clear that small groups were sent out to several towns, including Manene and Pavarando to acquire supplies for a large group of men, who appear not to have been familiar with the area. As a result, following the confrontation in Manene, the main body of this group made a major mistake of moving west, into the Sambu Comarca and valley. There had never been a large scale FARC incursion into this area as far as Post knows, and now we know why. The area is a trap, with access cut off by virtually unpassable mountains. On a map it appears tantalizingly close to the headwaters of the Jaque valley, where the 57th Front has a base, but in reality it is almost impossible to reach there without local help. Once they were trapped by SENA FRONT to the East, and the mountains to the south and west, a standoff developed. SENA FRONT could not send its police officers in to meet what appeared to have been a large and well armed force, and the Embera were demanding immediate action, bringing the Embassy and the media into the mix. Presumably, it was in everyone's interests that someone help this group get over the mountains, though we have no information on how that finally happened.

¶7. (C) With the GOP refusing to keep a SENA FRONT garrison in Pavarando (see reftel), it remains to be seen how this will end. The Embera are insisting that they need a detachment there to protect the entire Comarca/valley from the FARC and drug traffickers. The Embera are now very happy with the Embassy, crediting it with helping to pressure the GOP to take action in Pavarando. While the GOP at multiple levels was clearly not happy about the "gringos" being brought into the middle of this issue, we will take advantage of our ties with the Embera to promote our strategy of improved governance in the Darien and make our point with the GOP that we can only have an effective partnership if we have a clear vision of events on the ground.

¶8. (SBU) The development of this connection, which may now prove very valuable, is a product of the excellent teamwork between USAID and members of Post's Law Enforcement Support Working Group in developing Post's Darien strategy.
STEPHENSON